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TEXT:

The future for satellite-delivered digital audio broadcasting in the United States got more specific last week, as the FCC accepted for filing Satellite CD Radio Inc.'s application to deliver CD-quality audio services to credit card-sized, automobile-mounted satellite receivers by 1996.

The National Association of Broadcasters said it will file a petition to deny Satellite CD Radio's application.

On Oct. 13, just one week after the commission proposed allocating 50 mhz of spectrum to satellite DAB (Broadcasting, Oct. 12), it released the specific application for industry comments by Nov. 13, replies by Dec. 1 and responses by Dec. 15.

"It is premature to accept an individual company's application before you have a comprehensive policy on DAB in place," said NAB spokeswoman Lynn McReynolds. "To put satellite DAB ahead of terrestrial DAB - give satellite a jump - creates a serious threat to localism."

In addition to planning the launch of two birds to deliver 30 channels of nonstop, commercial-free subscription and "pay-per-listen" music formats from two orbital slots, "on a non-common carrier, non-broadcasting basis," Satellite CD Radio also plans to implement an as yet unspecified number of terrestrial repeaters five years after the service is launched in 1996.

"For a subscription fee of about \$5-\$10 per month," the company says it will deliver "swing, children's entertainment and folk rock formats ... rarely available in local radio markets."

At the same time, the FCC set a Dec. 15 deadline for other "concrete, comprehensive" proposals to operate similar systems via eight orbital positions in the S-band (2310-2360 mhz).

RBDS HOME STRETCH

The proposed Radio Broadcast Data System (RBDS) standard gained "overwhelming approval" on an initial ballot among National Radio Systems Committee (NRSC) members last Tuesday (Oct. 13), meaning a new generation of car and other AM-FM receivers with data displays could be in the consumer market by mid-1993. Made up of National Association of Broadcasters and Electronic Industries Association members, NRSC estimates a January release of the standard, which has been two years in the making.

RBDS will allow radios to receive text transmissions (such as station identifications and program information) and emergency alerts (overriding CD or cassette operation). RBDS also will allow consumers to scan the radio dial in search of a particular format, and it will support Emergency Broadcast System and paging technologies.

"We're pleased that NAB and EIA have cooperated to lead development of this new standard," said NAB Executive Vice President John Abel. "The application of RBDS to both the AM and FM bands has assured that all radio stations may participate."

FCC TO LAUNCH CABLE

ENCRYPTION INQUIRY

Titan Satellite Systems Corp. expects cable TV programmers and satellite equipment manufacturers and distributors will provide the FCC with "significant information regarding current market conditions and practices that have blocked competition" in the satellite descrambler market, says Titan Vice President Michael Meltzer - former executive for General Instrument, supplier of the industry's only descrambler, VideoCipher.

Within two weeks, the FCC is expected to issue a notice of inquiry into encryption technology for cable programing, with emphasis on the fact that General Instrument remains the only supplier of decoders.

The inquiry will focus on whether VideoCipher competitors ought to be given access to GI's DBS authorization center. Titan co-owns VideoCipher-compatible patents and plans to sell its Linkabit descrambler for \$250, compared with GI's \$336. Meltzer says Titan, which now enters its fourth week of negotiations with cable satellite programmers, will test its own authorization center by December and go to market by February or March, with or without intervention from regulators.

Whether the FCC has the jurisdiction to take action - such as mandating access to GI's authorization center - will in fact be part of the inquiry. Jonathan Levy of the FCC's Office of Plans and Policy emphasized the inquiry proposes no rule changes, but said a report on the results will surely be passed on to Representatives Ed Markey (D-Mass.) and Tom McMillen (D-Md.), who requested the NOI be conducted.

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